R3823-1-P

Media Monitor

Center for Media and Public Affairs • 2101 L Street, NW • Suite 505 • Washington, D.C. 20037 202-223-2942

Volume III, Number 1 January 1989

The War on Drugs
Covering the Debate Over Drug Abuse

How have the media covered the war on drugs? To find out, we examined policy-related stories on illegal drugs in national media outlets. We monitored the ABC, CBS, and NBC evening newscasts, the *Washington Post*, *Time* and *Newsweek*. The coverage totalled 290 television stories, and 207 articles in the *Post*, 41 in *Time*, and 24 in *Newsweek* - 562 stories in all.

Major Findings

■ **Use or Abuse** - When drug use was debated, one source in six defended or accepted the use of currently prohibited drugs. *Page 3*

■ **Losing the War** - Stories criticizing failed policies outnumbered those praising successes by a three to one margin. *Page 4*

■ **Roasting the Reagans** - Four out of five evaluations of President and Mrs. Reagan's role in the war on drugs were negative. *Page 5*

■ **TV's Bad News** - On TV news criticism of the war on drugs outnumbered praise by an eight to one margin, compared to a three to two negative margin in print. CBS broadcast more criticism than ABC and NBC combined. *Page 5*

■ **Advice and Dissent** - The policies discussed most frequently followed a conservative agenda - expanded police and military operations and stiffer sentences. But the criticisms seen most often reflected a liberal perspective - the need to spend more money and to focus on the social and economic causes of drug abuse.

Media Monitor (Copyright 1989) is a monthly publication of the Center for Media and Public Affairs, a nonpartisan and nonprofit research organization. The Center conducts scientific studies of how the media treat social and political issues.

Editors:
Dr. S. Robert Lichter
Dr. Linda S. Lichter

Research Director:
Daniel Amundson

Election Project Coordinator:
Richard Noyes

Public Affairs Director:
Toni Grueninger

Production and Graphics:
Scott Chronister
Maria Wood

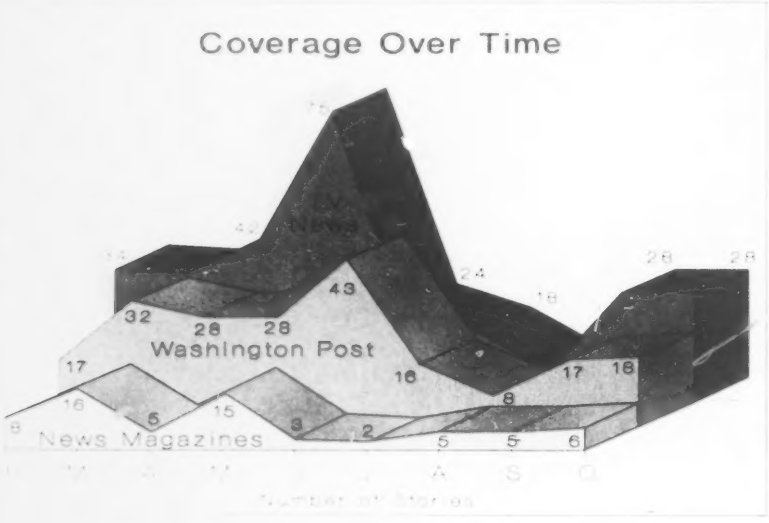
***

Drug Watch

We monitored national media coverage of the war on drugs from January 25 through October 31, 1988. The study period began with President Reagan's State of the Union address. It concluded as the presidential campaign neared its culmination. During this time drug abuse became the subject of an ongoing policy debate in Washington, an election debate waged across the country, and international disputes with Latin American nations like Panama, Mexico, and Colombia. In the process the drug problem became the focus of intense public concern. As the election neared, drugs were named as a leading topic of concern in public opinion polls.

The tide of the battle has turned, and we are beginning to win the crusade for a drug-free America.

- Ronald Reagan
Time, 3/14



This nine-month period featured heavy media coverage - 290 stories on the network evening newscasts, with a combined airtime of 7 hours 25 minutes; 207 *Washington Post* articles covering 3708 column inches; and 65 articles in *Time* and *Newsweek*. While the networks ran nearly identical numbers of stories, coverage in the news magazines diverged sharply - 41 stories totalling 1146 column inches in *Time*, compared to only 24 stories and 498 inches in *Newsweek*.

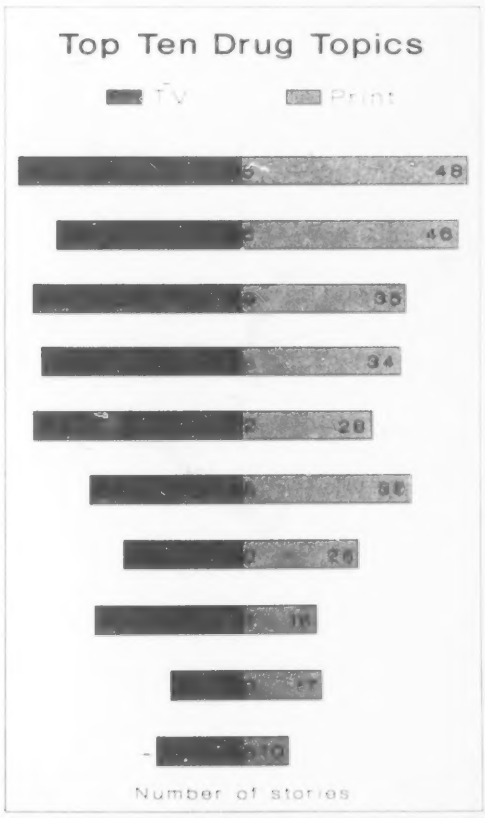
The coverage peaked during the spring (especially on television), fed by reports of the administration's stepped-up rhetoric, disclosures about Panamanian dictator General Noriega, and the continuing election debate. After dipping sharply during the summer, media attention surged in the fall, fueled once again by campaign politics. The debate over drugs was one of the top five policy issues covered on television news throughout the 1988 campaign. In addition, the drug issue made the top 10 list of topics covered on TV news during 1988, even after excluding reports that treated drugs in the context of other major stories, such as the election, Panama, and crime news (*Media Monitor* 12/88).

Buying drugs is as easy as going to an Avon or Tupperware party.

- Drug counselor,
Washington Post, 2/28

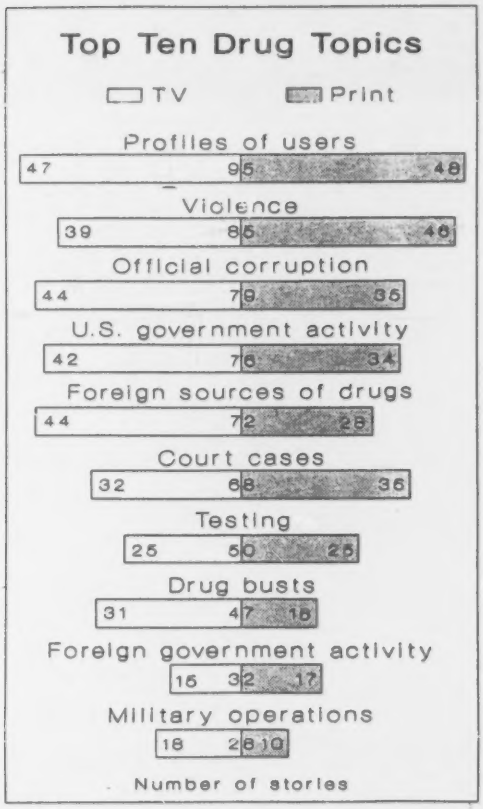
The Line on Drugs

The drug debate overlapped a variety of news genres - crime, politics, international relations, even civil liberties (e.g. drug tests). Amid the policy debate and official pronouncements, however, the media focused on the human drama and tragedy associated with drug abuse.



Media Monitor
January 1989

Correction to graph on page 2.



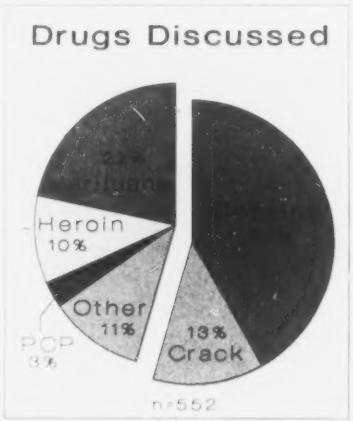
The demand for drugs, often featuring profiles of drug users, was the most frequent topic of news reports in both television and print outlets. The violence associated with drug use and the criminal underworld surrounding it came in a close second, followed by official corruption, especially in Central and South American countries involved in drug production and transportation. The activities of federal agencies involved in the drug war, such as the Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA), the Coast Guard, and the FBI, also provided a steady steam of stories. Other staples of coverage included drug-related litigation, the debate over drug testing, arrests of dealers and "drug lords," and use of the military to cut off the inflow of drugs.

Television's heavier focus on drug busts, international trafficking, and military operations reflects the medium's need for good visuals. Network camera crews could accompany agents on interdiction missions or use official film of such efforts to produce action-packed stories. But one charge often levelled at television did not pan out this time. TV did not stress violence any more than print outlets did, since the violence associated with drug dealing (and double-dealing) normally took place out of camera range.

We have more drugs on the street than we've ever had in the history of the United States.

- Rep. Charles Rangel (D-NY), NBC, 2/29

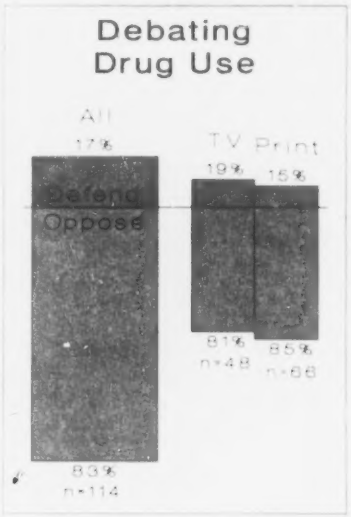
Drugs of Choice



News about drugs in 1988 was preeminently news about cocaine. A majority of all drug mentions concerned either cocaine (233 stories) or its derivative "crack" (73 additional stories). Marijuana and hashish provided a strong secondary focus (119 stories), especially after the Reagan administration's zero tolerance policy cast greater attention on users of "recreational" drugs. Only 52 stories mentioned heroin. And PCP, the source of rising alarm some years back, attracted a mere 19 stories, only one of them on television.

Drug users profiled on television tended to fall into two demographic camps -- poor inner-city blacks addicted to crack or heroin, and middle- or upper-status suburban white users of cocaine or marijuana.

Debating Drug Use



While most sources debated strategies for winning the war on drugs, some questioned whether this battle should be fought at all. One source in six (17%) either defended or would accept the use of currently illegal drugs. Defenders of drug use got their best hearing on TV news -- 19% support, compared to 15% in print outlets.

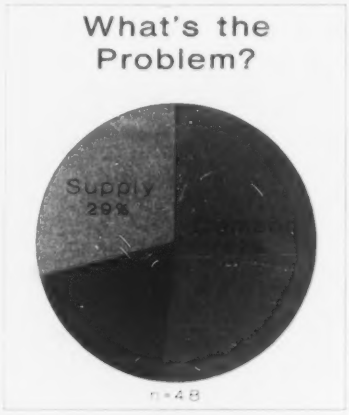
Some sources limited their support to "recreational" drugs. A more inclusive view appeared after Baltimore mayor Kurt Schmoke called for legalizing prohibited drugs. For example, *Time*, (5/30) quoted Harvard law professor Alan Dershowitz: "We've already decriminalized two drugs, alcohol and tobacco. Now it's time to decriminalize a third, heroin." The same piece also cited economist Milton Friedman: "The harm that is done by drugs is predominantly caused by the fact that they are illegal."

Almost no one, however, defended drug sellers. One exception was convicted smuggler Carlos Lehder Rivas, who called cocaine trafficking "a revolutionary weapon against North American imperialism."*Washington Post*, 5/20.

Supply Siders

Those who agreed on the need to eliminate illegal drugs split into supply- and demand-side camps. Supply-siders focus on halting the manufacturing or influx of drugs. Sample: "The greatest threat to our security in this hemisphere is not the Sandinistas. It's this avalanche of drugs that is pouring into this country." - Michael Dukakis, CBS, 8/21.

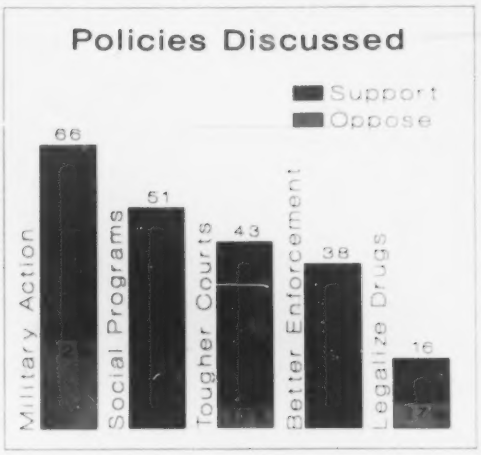
Demand-siders stress the importance of changing societal mores or getting users to "just say no." Sample: "Drugs are like quicksilver. They flow to wherever there is an opening...If the demand is there, the stuff is going to come in." - Pentagon spokesman, *Washington Post*, 5/13.



In 1988 the demand-siders won the battle for public attention. Such unlikely allies as Jesse Jackson and Nancy Reagan provided a majority (52%) of source comments on this issue, compared to only 29% who called cutting off supplies the top priority. The remaining 19% asserted that both approaches were necessary.

To legalize drugs would give us a vast army of people who are out of control.

- Mitchell Rosenthal, *Time*, 5/30



There was no opposition to the next most frequently cited option (51 mentions), which was private or government-supported social programs to provide more education, job training, or drug treatment for addicts. Calls for tougher sentencing of drug offenders (43 mentions) also featured only token opposition (12%). And no one opposed the 38 pleas for improved enforcement of drug laws, by hiring more police, equipping them better, increasing prison space, etc. Other than military activity, the only well-publicized proposal to elicit opposition voices was legalization. Of 16 sources who took a position on legalizing drugs, 63% supported the policy change and 37% opposed it. Among the critics was DEA head John Lawn, quoted in *Time* (5/30): "Drugs are not bad because they're illegal. They're illegal because they're bad."

We have legalization of drugs now, because people are not being prosecuted.

- Customs Official, *Time*, 5/30

Policy Options

Despite the emphasis on reducing demand, the policies debated most frequently in the media concerned military action to cut off the supply of drugs. Proposals included increased air and sea patrols and eradication of drug crops in Latin America. Of the 66 sources who weighed in on this topic, two-thirds (68%) supported an expanded military role. Among the naysayers was a RAND Corp. expert on ABC (5/18): "Neither the military nor any other interdiction agency can make smuggling risky enough...to make a difference..."

Losing the War

Current federal policies in the war on drugs found few defenders in the national media. The success or failure of existing efforts was the underlying theme of 69 stories on the drug problem. Our coding went beyond the views of individual sources to take into account elements of language and style that provided the story itself with a kind of viewpoint.

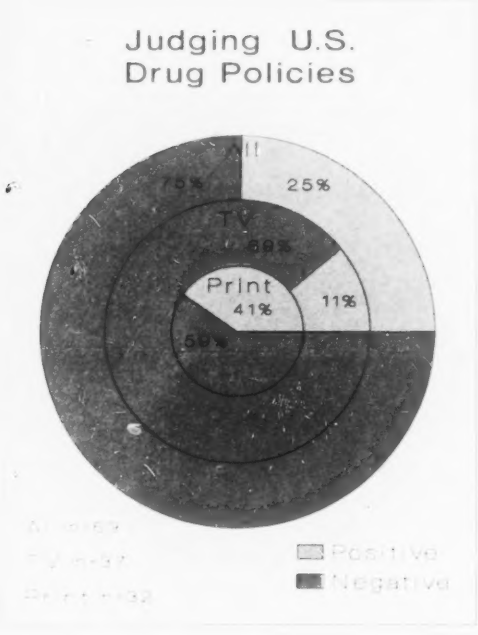
The result: Stories whose point was to criticize policy failures outnumbered those praising successes by a 3 to 1 margin. For example, the

administration's zero tolerance policy was roundly criticized as unworkable or quixotic. The *Post* (6/22) quoted Congressman Gerry Studds (D-Mass.), "There was a strong bi-partisan consensus that rationality had left the scene and there isn't a semblance of balance, fairness, or reasonableness in the policy. You don't go around harassing innocent citizens."

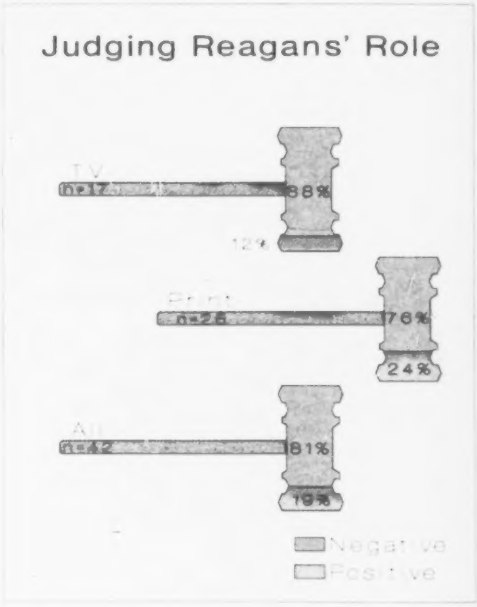
By far the sharpest criticism of U.S. policy came on television, where negative stories outnumbered positive ones by a margin of 8 to 1 (89% negative). By comparison, the margin in print articles was 3 to 2 negative (59% to 41%). On CBS (7/13), for example, a representative of the Drug Policy Foundation indicted the administration's supply-side efforts: "Marijuana use has gone from being almost a non-crop to one of the leading cash crops in the country, worth between ten and thirty billion dollars a year." And on ABC (3/1), Rep. Larry Smith (D-FL) complained: "They (the administration) tell people to say no to drugs, and then they can't say no to the dictators and other people in other countries that they know have been involved."

How was it that in 3 years a network Washington set up to run arms to the contras wound up running cocaine into this country for the most vicious drug cartel in the world, at the same time we were supposed to be fighting a war against drugs?

Richard Threlkeld, ABC, 4/7



The same pattern of overwhelming criticism characterized evaluations of President and Mrs. Reagan's personal efforts in the war against drugs. We coded 42 comments that were directed specifically toward the Reagans or the "Reagan administration" or policies identified with them personally (e.g. the "Just Say No" campaign). Four out of five (81%) evaluations were negative, and support appeared only half as often on television as in print (12% vs. 24% positive comments in the broadcast and print media, respectively).



Thus, the *Post* quoted Jesse Jackson on April 16, "The Reagan administration's efforts against drugs have been a failure and a disgrace." By contrast, a February 29 *Post* article quoted Congressman Charles Rangel (D-NY), chairman of the Select Committee on Narcotics Abuse and Control, "If we didn't have Nancy Reagan we wouldn't have anything." On television, the only sources to praise the Reagans' efforts were members of the administration or other Republicans. More typical of assessments over the airwaves was that of New York mayor Koch on CBS (2/29): "We are truly in a war with the drug pushers, but the president is not acting as the commander in chief. If anything, he's acting like a wimp."

For many people, drugs are a way of life, and 'just say no' is a joke.

- Noah Nelson, NBC, 5/16

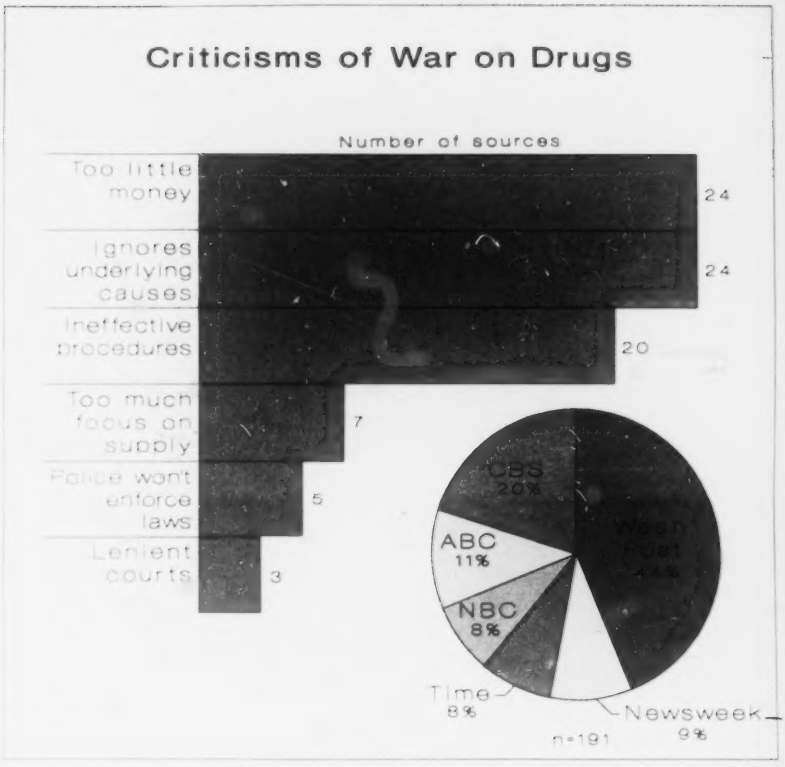
To illustrate how strong the tide of policy criticism was on television, recall that 19% of televised sources defended or accepted the use of currently illegal drugs. Thus, drug use was supported more frequently than the Reagan administration's policies to halt it.

What Went Wrong?

Overall, 191 sources offered criticism of how the war on drugs has been waged. If reports on policy options followed the administration's conservative philosophy (military involvement, more police, stiffer penalties) media-borne criticism led with the liberal agenda.

The criticisms seen most often (tied with 24 mentions apiece) were complaints of inadequate funding and arguments that current policies ignored the deeper social and economic causes of drug abuse. For example, *Time* (5/9) quoted one medical expert on drug abuse, "Just saying no doesn't cut it. The poor ask, 'What can we just say yes to?'" In the *Post* (6/3), Jesse Jackson advisor Roger Wilkins went further: "There are no economic opportunities (in urban ghettos) other than drugs, and people do what they have to in order to survive."

CBS broadcast more critical statements (38) than the other two networks combined (35). Similarly, *Newsweek* managed to publish more criticism than *Time*, despite publishing fewer than half as many column inches on the subject.



Taking Issue

Death to Drug Lords?

The only thing (drug lords) fear is death itself. ...Let them be on the end of that fear for a change.

- Sen. Alfonse D'Amato (R-NY), *Washington Post*, 5/17

Shoot those drug barons down and machine gun the survivors.

- Rep. Arthur Ravenel, (R-SC), ABC, 6/15

The United States ought not be in the business of taking lives.

- Sen. Edward Kennedy (D-MA), *Washington Post*, 5/17

Capital punishment is our society's recognition of the sanctity of human life.

- Sen. Orin Hatch (R-UT), *Washington Post*, 5/17

Zero Tolerance

It's not any less illegal to possess a marijuana cigarette than it is to possess a ton of marijuana.

- U.S. Marshal, *Washington Post*, 5/10

It just doesn't make any sense. Y'know, it's not like living in America, ...it's like living in some kind of totalitarian country.

- Boat owner, ABC, 5/9